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ABSTRACT

In response to a state-wide request in 1986-87 from the governor of Missouri, public institutions of higher education undertook assessment projects related to their students' basic skills. English faculty at Missouri Western State College conducted a composition assessment project in which they used timed holistically scored writing as a means of placing students. Results were overwhelmingly negative. After three years of using the Writing Placement Exam (WPE), however, valuable modifications have been made, including streamlining the administration of the WPE. It has been argued that the greater the consequences of error in assessment, the greater the responsibility of assessors to be humane, fair, and effective. With this in mind, great caution must be exercised when viewing holistically scored timed writing as a curriculum evaluation tool. Timed holistically scored writing shows the greatest promise as a placement instrument. If used wisely, it could produce benefits for faculty, students and education that outweigh the negative aspects. (PRA)

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Promises Kept and Broken: Holistically Scored Impromptu Writing Exams

During the 1986-87 academic year Missouri's Governor Ashcroft requested that public institutions of higher education undertake assessment projects related to their students' basic skills. Partially as a response to this state-wide request, but also because of a need to evaluate the effectiveness of the placement procedures and instructional content of its composition courses, English faculty at Missouri Western State College conducted a composition assessment project, 1987-89.

The composition faculty had a high degree of administrative support and, in general, were willing to explore the use of a timed holistically scored writing as a means of placing students. There was a high level of dissatisfaction with the present placement method--the use of the ACT English score as a placer. Therefore, we anticipated a fruitful, positive experience. Instead we received impressively negative results.

Promises Broken: Using impromptu writings to evaluate curriculum:

Our plan was simple. As one means of evaluating the effectiveness of our curriculum, we decided to compare students' English skills before beginning a composition course to their skills

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following completion of the college's composition sequence. Our college administration requested we pre- and post-test with a nationally-normed English exam. We opted for the English portion of the ACT since pre-test scores would be available without additional test administration because the ACT is required for admissions. But because the EACT is an objective test requiring no writing on the test taker's part and because we believed "writing assessment must entail the use of direct measures of actual student writing" [cWa Position Paper], we decided to develop our own instrument--a 45-minute impromptu descriptive essay developed locally and scored holistically by English staff members who followed guidelines advocated by Edward M. White in *Teaching and Assessing Writing*.

This Writing Placement Exam (WPE) would be given as a pre- and post-test to measure improvements in writing skills. Written by students before they register, we could also use the WPE score to place students in their beginning composition courses. At the end of our composition sequence, (for three semesters--spring, 1988, fall 1988, and spring 1989) we administered the EACT and the WPE in a single two-hour session during finals week to students completing their last required composition course. We scored both versions of each student's Writing Placement Exam during finals week in order to insure reliability.

Even before the first of the end-of-testing semester testing sessions, the perils of using our holistically-scored impromptu essay to evaluate student improvements in English (and therefore composition curriculum effectiveness) became apparent. Some composition faculty had not read memos and/or listened at departmental meetings when

the assessment project with the special testing sessions were discussed. When their students learned late in the term that they had to take the tests during an extra session in exam week, students complained (without success) to administrative officials. Some instructors cancelled their classes' traditional final exam; others required that students return and sit for it. Some instructors told students that their score results on their second writing of the WPE would be factored into their final course grades; others told their students that the test was a waste of time but that they had to show up and write the exam anyway. In other words, some students were highly motivated to perform well on the WPE; other students lacked motivation and resented having to take the time during finals week for post-tests in the assessment project.

We made a critical error in our zeal to report WPE score results to departmental faculty following the first testing session. We set up our data base listing students by composition sections so that as soon as we keyboarded pre- and post-test WPE scores at the testing site, the software not only churned out the change in individual scores and computed score ranges, standard deviations, and mean scores on pre- and post-WPEs for all students tested but also provided the ranges, standard deviations, and mean scores for each composition section. Not surprisingly, when the papers were scored, students from sections where teachers reported that the exam results "counted," tended to have higher scores on their second writing of the WPE than students from sections where the exam did not affect their course grade. Faculty compared their students' results with the results of other faculty's students; morale plummeted. At least one faculty member

went to the dean for reassurance that his students' overall negative performance on their second writing of the WPE would not be reflected in his annual evaluation. We learned never to report student data in any manner in which faculty comparisons could be made.

Our WPE post-test results each semester yielded the same results. Students who scored low (below six out of a possible twelve points) on their first writing of the essay and who began their composition sequence in our development writing course tended to show significant increases (a mean increase of almost three points) in their scores on their post-WPEs. Students who scored above six on their first writing of the essay and who began the composition sequence in the first regular course showed a sustained rate of test scores on their post-test WPE. We believe two factors contributed to this lack of improvement. (1) Student scores regress to the mean; students who were at the high end (above nine) on the twelve-point scale for their pre-WPE were likely to score at or below their original score on the post-WPE. (2) The WPE, which asks students to write a persuasive essay, assesses students' ability to perform successfully in our first regular (nondevelopmental) composition course. Once that level is achieved, little growth should be expected.

We concluded that the holistic scoring of our Writing Placement Examination as a post-test was not a valid means to measure students' improvement in English skills. While we evaluated students' actual writing rather than their responses to multiple-choice questions about writing, the second WPE only measured students' ability to write an impromptu 45-minute essay and did not test the kinds of reflective, analytical, and research skills we taught in our two regular composition

courses. Furthermore by using holistic scoring, we reduced student writing to a single, quantifiable number which allows for statistical manipulation but establishes opportunities for gross generalizations and inaccurate portrayals of student abilities and teacher performance.

Our two-year writing assessment project has left us with a healthy skepticism about measuring students' improvement in English following completion of their composition sequence. Two sets of pre- and post-test scores on the WPE and EACT tell us little about our students or our composition courses.

Promises Kept: Holistically-Scored Placement Exams

Is the timed, holistically-scored essay, unproductive as a means of assessing writing? The Missouri Western experience would indicate the answer is "not entirely." Two distinct gains came from the experience. Recognizing that a single, timed-writing sample does not "measure" the writing skills of students leaving our composition classes, we now require our students to keep a portfolio. In these themes, letters, reports, poems, autobiographies, and term papers are the real evidence of our students' improvements and the reflection of our composition curriculum. Secondly, the timed holistically scored writing sample--modified to be sure--has found its greatest success as a measure of placement of incoming students.

The use of the WPE provides us with a useful and, we believe, much more humane, fair, and effective means of placing students in our composition sequence than the use of a single EACT score. Prior to 1987, students at Missouri Western were placed solely on the basis of their EACT--a score of 15 and below placed a student in

developmental composition; a score of 16 and above placed a student in the first "regular" course. Faculty in the department complained that the courses sorted this way were extremely uneven in terms of writing ability. In addition, over 20% of our students arrived on our campus with no EACT available, necessitating their waiting at least a semester to begin their work in composition or beginning automatically in the developmental course. Given our population base with its large non-traditional student component (and concurrent high anxiety), the EACT scores were also seen as non-reflective of what a student would be able to do within the classroom.

There were some negative "start-up" costs. Our initial administration cost approximately \$1000 for supplies. Because the original WPE was part of a grant in assessment from the college, the personnel costs initially were covered by the grant. The grant is now concluded, and the Department of English, Foreign Languages, and Journalism has had to absorb the costs of the WPE into its budget. Financial support has come to us from the Division of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and gradually, the perception is growing that the WPE is a service to the school, not just to the department. Our President and Academic Vice President have supported the use of the WPE by scoring for us; we hope that their continued involvement will result in continued funding of supplies and stipends for readers.

There were some negative "emotional" costs as well. Change can be threatening to faculty--college wide. While most faculty at the college applauded our efforts, there were some who wished for a more "objective," less "subjective" measurement of incoming students' writing abilities. Because we tested "high" EACT students into our

developmental course (as well as "low" EACT students into our regular course), we were perceived as placing everybody in the lower English course. When the figures continually showed that the same number would have been placed in the two courses regardless of the method used, some of these objections died away. When such objections are raised by faculty, our method has been to invite the speaker to become a scorer at the first opportunity.

Our three years of using the holistically scored WPE have produced valuable modifications. Two years ago, we began to give a two-point bonus to students who scored at the 80th percentile or higher on the EACT to insure that a high EACT student who tested into the developmental course would have written a paper at least in the lower quarter of the sample. We have streamlined our administration of the WPE. On the day a new student arrives, we now screen her for EACT, test her in a standardized situation, score her exam, and distribute the results to her before she goes on to select her classes for the semester. During the five summer Student Orientation Programs in 1990 we tested 738 students (approximately 150 per program).

This year we produced a brochure on the WPE which described testing and placement procedures and which announced the topic of the timed essay. These are mailed to students when they are invited on campus for orientation sessions. We believe providing students the WPE brochure helps them to reduce writing anxiety and allows those students who prefer to prewrite and think about the topic to do so. In addition, student who feel they have been misplaced as a result of their WPE results may request a conference with the Coordinator of the

Writing Placement Examination. The goal in each of these conferences is to reassure the student and to help the student understand why the placement was made. Each individual case, therefore, is dealt with individually. Sometimes the student will retest; sometimes the student will be told to request a new placement after a week of classes; sometimes a student will be requested to produce a portfolio of her work. We feel that the WPE is an indication that we as a department and as a school care about the students, not that we are out to punish them.

The numbers speak very positively. Had we placed by EACT alone in the fall of 1990, we would have placed four more students in the lower English classes than we did by using our holistically scored WPE. However, we moved nearly 300 entering freshmen. The numbers of students in each course remained substantially the same, but the people were not the same. Our faculty tell us that the classes are easier to teach. We have heard anecdotally from teachers in both beginning writing courses that the placement achieved through the holistically- scored timed writing gives them classes comprised of students able to write on a corresponding level.

Two other positive benefits must be mentioned. The scoring of the WPE has created an opportunity for faculty from across the curriculum and administrators to come together to discuss writing and to evaluate the writing of our students. Again and again, we have found that English teachers are less critical of student writing than those from outside the discipline. As non-English faculty and administrators see the general level of writing as it enters our college, a positive atmosphere is created. Secondly, by choosing to evaluate a student's

writing rather than their ability to recognize error as evidenced by the EACT, we are strongly reinforcing writing as a higher order cognitive skill.

Our goal as assessors and teachers of writing must be to use writing tasks and evaluations which are governed by the definition *assidere*--to sit beside. Dr. Richard Larson, at the 1989 Missouri Colloquium on Writing Assessment argued persuasively that the greater the consequences of error in assessment, the greater is our responsibility as assessors to be humane, fair and effective. Or as Stephen Jay Gould says "Few tragedies can be more extensive than the stunting of life, few injustices deeper than the denial of an opportunity to strive or even to hope, by a limit imposed from without, but falsely identified as lying within" (29). With this in mind, we must view a holistically- scored timed writing as a barrier or as an evaluation tool of curriculum with great caution. The greatest promise of the timed holistically scored writing is as an instrument for placement, which, if used wisely, can produce benefits for faculty, for students, and for education which outweigh the negatives.

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